10: d'Orleans--332 [3] T-3 (1891-92) 1894 Laos
116, 202, 346, 731, 793

"After leaving Ouate Mai, we ascend the small hill which commands a fine view of the town, about 350 feet above, and upon the summit of which are several small buildings and a gilt belfry in which is hung a tam tam about three feet in length. Several men keep guard over it and beat it to let the bonzes know when it is the hour for study, or else an alarm bell in case of fire. There is a grand view from here, as the city is at our feet, half hidden among the cocoa trees, one part, which was burnt last year and has been rebuilt, being less wooded than the others."

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the greatest artistic interest. I asked the headman if it would be possible to take any, as the bonze was crumpling and smashing them vigorously with his broom. But the chief shook his head regretfully. Buddhism had degenerated in these remote provinces and was swamped with re-emergent spirit cults. These objects had been dedicated to the *phi*[1] and would have to be burnt in a ritual fire. The *phi* would also receive the burnt essence, I noticed, of a large, very obscene, and no doubt magically valuable picture.

At about this time when the bonze was treading underfoot the village's artistic output of several months, a party of Issarak or Viet-Minh, timing their action to coincide with the convoy's arrival at Moung Kassy, had set fire to the forest just south of the post. A steady breeze was blowing from that quarter, and the fire, started over a width of about a mile and fanning out as it advanced, moved slowly towards the fort.

Coming up over the river bank it took us some time to realize what was happening. There was a haze; but then there was always a haze in Laos, although by this time of day it should have been clearing and not thickening. And then we heard the crackling, punctuated with the sharp pops, which might have been distant rifle fire, but which were the explosions of thick stems of bamboo. Looking up then we saw the curtain of smoke hanging over Muong Kassy, white at the top, and black at its base and streaked occasionally by lance-points of flame, which were still two miles away.

We ran to where the car was parked, started it and tried to drive down the road towards the fire. Dupont was as pleased with it as July 14th. In about fifty yards we got tangled up with the convoy and had to leave the car on the side of the road and run on. The fire was advancing on a ragged front and was as irresistible as a volcano. Black smoke was being blown before it so that at first the flames were out of sight; but when they came through they were two hundred feet high — twice the height of the tallest tree. It went forward in zigzagging rushes; eating its way quickly through the bamboo

[1] [i.e., spirits. — Analyst]

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669 thickets, which went up like oil wells. A lane of fire had broken
726 right out of the general advance and its spear-point was wandering
731 up over the hill-side, already level with the fort. Large clumps of green forest were being left behind or encircled and then consumed at leisure as the fire went through the bamboo. It caught at the lianas, too, and went up a tree from top to bottom in shrivelling streamers – just like Christmas decorations catching fire. The noise of the exploding bamboos was becoming deafening and the sky was covered in a cloud through which black ash streamed up like flotsam carried on flood-waters. I noticed, though, that only the tops of some of the trees had caught on the other side of the road.

Orders were given to prepare to evacuate the fort. There was a great deal of ammunition and thousands of gallons of petrol, stored in cans, and the soldiers were swarming like ants stacking it in the road and loading the lorries. Confusion developed and matured into chaos, largely caused by the arrival of half the convoy, which blocked the road and prevented the lorries being driven out of the fort. Before an evacuation could be made the convoy had to be moved on through the village, but half the drivers couldn't be found. They had wandered off to look at the fire and taken their starting keys with them.

In the meanwhile the Laotians and Chinese rushing out of their houses with their beds and bedding, and piling their stocks of groceries between the wheels of the cars had made rapid movement impossible, even when the drivers could be rounded up. One family was actually at work taking their house down.

And then as an hour passed in struggling tumult with the convoy at last bludgeoned on through the village and safely parked on the other side, and hundreds of crates and cans loaded on to the lorries, the wind veered and the main front of the fire went by, about half a mile away. A few offshoots coming in our direction burned feebly for a while among the bamboos, and it was all over.